

Helping Your Teenager Deal with Stress

Overview

Tips for helping your teenager learn healthy ways to manage stress.

- Teenagers and stress
- Helping your teenager manage stress
- More practical tips for managing stress
- Getting help

Raising a teenager can be stressful. But being a teenager can be even more stressful. Teenagers feel pressure from all sides: at school, with friends, at home. But they don't always have the tools and information they need to handle that stress in healthy ways. Below you'll find information for helping your teenager learn to recognize and deal with stress.

Teenagers and stress

The first step in dealing with stress is learning to recognize it. By helping your teenager pay attention to her stress warning signs, you'll be teaching her how to recognize when she is stressed out.

- **Watch for signs of stress.** It's important to be aware of common stress signs so you know when your teenager is feeling stressed. Everyone reacts to stress differently, but here are some common signs of stress in teens:
 - trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
 - headaches, backaches, and stomachaches
 - muscle tension
 - skipping meals or overeating
 - irritability
 - frequent crying
 - anxiety
 - withdrawing from friends or family
 - lack of energy
- **Help your teenager learn to recognize her own stress warning signs.** For example, if you notice that your child tends to skip meals when she's feeling overwhelmed by her schedule, you could say, "I noticed that you didn't eat breakfast much this week. Is there something you're worried about?"
- **Be familiar with what causes your teenager to feel stressed.** Some teenagers put a lot of academic pressure on themselves, while others feel stressed from juggling a job and a busy social life. By knowing what causes stress for your teenager you will be able to help her take action to alleviate stress before it develops.
- **Look for ways to talk about stress with your teenager.** If you find that your teenager reacts defensively when you try to talk about how she manages stress, try to bring up the subject in a different way. For example, you could discuss how a

peer managed a stressful event. “I talked to Marco’s mom yesterday. She told me that he has been so worried about his parent’s divorce that he was having trouble concentrating in class. They made a couple of appointments with the school counselor, who helped Marco feel better about things and more able to handle school.”

- *Be aware of how events or changes in your family may affect your teenager’s stress level.* Many parents think their teenagers are old enough to handle stressful events, such as a divorce or a financial downturn, but this isn’t always true. If your family is going through a stressful period, be sure that your child gets the support and reassurance she needs.

Helping your teenager manage stress

Here are some ways you can help your teenager learn to deal with stress.

- *Be sure your teenager knows that you are always available to listen* -- without being judgmental or giving advice. It can be hard for parents to simply listen, but often teenagers just need a sounding board to think through problems on their own.
- *Try to set positive examples for managing stress.* Be mindful of how you handle stress. What message are you sending when you get overly frustrated by a traffic jam or snap at family members when things heat up at work?
- *Share your own stressful experiences.* Talk about a stressful day at work and how you dealt with it, or share stories from when you were a teenager and felt overwhelmed by an event or activity. This will help your child understand that everyone is affected by stress.
- *Help your child learn to see stressful events from a different perspective.* For example, if your teenager worries that he’s not part of the popular crowd, ask him what characteristics he admires in people in that crowd and whether those traits match up to his ideal of friendship.
- *Help your child realize that he already has effective stress relief techniques.* For example, listening to music, exercising, and talking with friends can all be effective ways of dealing with stress.
- *Understand the difference between distraction and avoidance activities.* Watching television, calling a friend, or reading a book are all distractions that can help teenagers cope with stress. But sometimes these distractions can go on for too long and become ways to avoid the underlying problem. For example, if your teenager likes to unwind by playing an hour of computer games after school, that’s probably OK. But if he comes home from school and spends four hours playing computer games instead of starting his homework, he may be using avoidance as a way to deal with stress. Talk with your teenager about how to break homework or other tasks down into manageable tasks rather than

procrastinating or stressing out about whether or not they can be accomplished.

- *Talk with your child about why it's important to replace unhealthy ways of managing stress with healthy ones.* Help your child understand that sometimes stress can cause people to engage in risky behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, or doing drugs. Talk about how these unhealthy reactions to stress can actually make stress worse because they never solve the underlying problem.
- *Talk about the role of negative thinking in stress.* “Awfulizing,” or imagining the worst-case scenario, or repeating negative thoughts almost always results in increased stress. Talk with your child about how he can recognize, and then learn to redirect, negative thoughts. Dr. Gloria Deckro, a teen stress specialist, recommends that teenagers break the chain of negative thinking by imagining they are using a remote control to switch channels to a more positive way of thinking.
- *Help your teenager learn to be forgiving of himself.* Many young people have a perfectionist attitude -- they want to be the best at everything they do, whether it's a basketball game or the SATs. Your child needs to learn that it's not possible to *always* be the best and it's OK if he has a bad day.
- *Acknowledge your teenager's worries and fear -- don't ever belittle them.* Try to avoid saying things like, “You won't even remember this when you're older” or “You think that's stressful, try working!” This might make your teenager feel that his fears and concerns aren't important to you or that you “just don't understand.”
- *Avoid setting expectations that are too high for your child.* Stress is often a result of parents placing expectations that are too high on their children. Remember to compliment your teen for the activities and challenges that he handles well.
- *Encourage your teenager to tackle stress at its source.* This can be the best way to deal with specific stressors. For example, if your teenager is feeling stressed by the prospect of an upcoming test, advise him to seek extra help from his teacher or ask another student to study with him.
- *Try not to take your teenager's stress personally or as an indication of your failure as a parent.* You can't protect your child from stress or manage it for him, but you can help him learn ways to handle his own stress.
- *Don't ignore stress signs or assume that your teenager will be able to deal with stress on his own.* Sometimes parents believe that teenagers will be able to “get over” stress on their own. But this just isn't always true. Your teenager needs your help identifying sources of stress and figuring out ways to reduce that stress.

More practical tips for managing stress

There are many other small, practical steps your teenager can take to manage stress. You can help your child in the following ways:

- *Try to keep the environment in your home relaxing.* A leisurely family meal or a weekly movie night are examples of ways you can make your home feel calm and peaceful.
- *Encourage your teenager to exercise, eat well, and get enough sleep.* These are the basic rules of stress management. Without regular sleep, exercise, and healthy foods, it's difficult to be at one's best. Also remember that consuming too much caffeine can actually make stress worse because it makes many people feel more stress.
- *Help your child be more organized.* Hours spent looking for car keys or trying to find an assignment are wasted time. Encourage your child to be more organized about schoolwork by writing assignments in a single notebook, checking her assignment book at the end of each day to make sure she's bringing home the right books, and planning ahead for long-term projects. Your teenager can be more organized in other ways, including
 - keeping track of appointments and events in a planner or calendar
 - making to-do lists
 - having a designated homework area stocked with all the necessary supplies
 - cleaning out school or sports bags once a week
 - establishing an "out basket" in the bedroom or other area of the house to store items that need to go to school or be returned to the video store or a friend's house
- *Look at your teenager's schedule to see if there are any adjustments she can make to help her feel less overloaded.* Can she cut back on the number of hours she works at her after-school job? Save an especially challenging class for next semester? Spread out her after-school activities through the week instead of loading them into one or two days? Also, be sure that your teenager has enough down time in her schedule.
- *Help your teenager learn to take advantage of her best, most efficient times of the day.* Though it might be contrary to your schedule, many teenagers are not at their best first thing in the morning, so this is probably not a good time to finish up a homework assignment. If your child tends to fade in the late afternoons then perk up after dinner, encourage her to tackle her homework at that time. Many teenagers actually feel most alert and energetic later in the evening and into the night.
- *Encourage your teenager to find and practice activities that she loves.* Taking the time to do something that makes one happy is one of the best stress relievers

available. Whether your child plays the clarinet or is a member of a sports team, make sure she sets aside time to participate in the activities she enjoys.

- *Give your teenager the time and space to deal with stress in whatever way works for her.* You may not feel that blaring music in her bedroom or spending an hour chatting online is a good stress relief technique, but it's important to respect that she might find these to be very effective ways of dealing with stress. It's also important to allow your teenager to unwind at her own pace. If she needs an hour after school to decompress, try to give it to her before you make demands.
- *Experiment with new stress relief techniques together.* You might try going for walks, taking a yoga class, watching funny movies, practicing guided relaxation, or anything else that's appealing. You and your teenager may also find it helpful to
 - write in a journal
 - exercise
 - practice deep breathing
 - meditate
 - take relaxing showers or baths
 - read a favorite book or a light mystery novel
 - drink a cup of tea and enjoy perusing a new magazine
 - do a fun seasonal outing or activity like taking a hike on a beautiful fall day or attending a community event

Getting help

Most of the stress that teenagers experience is a normal part of this challenging stage of life. But sometimes teenagers may experience chronic stress or stress might lead to negative behaviors, like drinking or doing drugs, or emotional problems like anxiety or depression. If you are concerned about your teenager's emotional or physical well-being, get help from a professional counselor immediately. Your employee assistance program (EAP) can help you find a local counselor and provide you with helpful resources and information. If you're not sure how to contact your EAP, ask a human resources representative.

The development of this article was funded by the IBM Global Work-Life Fund and the AT&T Family Care Development Fund, a joint project of AT&T, the Communications Workers of America, and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers,

Written with the help of Mary Beth Klotz, Ph.D., a project director at the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Dr. Klotz is a Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP) and a

6 • Helping Your Teenager Deal with Stress

certified special education teacher and administrator. She taught and worked as a school psychologist for 15 years in a variety of public school settings.

© 2004 Ceridian Corporation. All rights reserved.